

1890 INSTITUTIONS IN A CHANGING SOCIOECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT: DISCUSSION

Joyce E. Allen

Jones and Parks have prepared an interesting and thought-provoking paper on the historically black land-grant colleges and universities (commonly referred to as the 1890 institutions). They describe the mission of land-grant universities, trace the development of a dual system in the southern states to accomplish that mission, address the contribution and role of 1890 institutions, review problems facing land-grant universities, and offer a prescription for change. The authors have examined some important issues. However, some are addressed in a cursory manner due to the brevity of the paper. For example, in the section on contribution and role, Jones and Parks do not emphasize that the 1890 institutions are unique. That is, they are a different product from the 1862 institutions or historically white land-grant universities. Consequently, it is not clear from their paper why the 1890 institutions should continue to exist as separate universities within the land-grant system. In my comments, I will attempt to highlight the unique characteristics of the 1890 institutions and emphasize why they are of critical importance today.

UNIQUE CONTRIBUTIONS OF 1890 INSTITUTIONS

It is useful to examine the contributions of the 1890 institutions within the framework of significant changes that have already occurred in the social and economic structure of this country and those changes that are likely to occur in the near future. Recent data indicate that blacks, particularly black children, are in a precarious economic position. This does not bode well for the country as a whole, since the state of the nation's economy is determined in part by the skills and education level of its citizens.

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau show that progress was made in the 1960s in reducing the incidence of poverty among blacks. However, since then, the poverty rate for blacks has remained persistently high, ranging from about 30 to 36 percent. More

importantly, the poverty rate for black children (i.e., under 18 years of age) was an astounding 44.2 percent in 1988.

Education has played a crucial role in the limited economic progress that blacks have achieved. Nevertheless, equal access to higher education continues to be an elusive goal for many blacks. During the 1960s and early- to mid-1970s, the college enrollment of blacks (age 14 to 34 years) was on the rise. By 1977, blacks accounted for 10.8 percent of persons enrolled in college (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1988). In 1988 (the latest year for which data are available), their proportion was only 10.2 percent. Although the proportion of blacks graduating from high school has been increasing, a smaller share has been enrolling in colleges and universities. Reasons behind the relative decline in enrollment include reduction in the availability of Federal aid and a change in the composition of aid (e.g., from grants to loans).

Researchers at the Hudson Institute have assessed the education and skill levels that workers will need in the year 2000 and identified key labor market trends that will shape the last years of the twentieth century. Their findings have implications for the role of 1890 institutions. They suggest that (1) the workforce will grow slowly, becoming older, more female, and more disadvantaged, and (2) the new jobs in service industries will demand much higher skill levels than the jobs of today. Further, they indicate that nonwhites will represent about 30 percent of the net additions to the workforce between 1985 and the year 2000. In addition, more than half of the new jobs that will be created during this period are expected to require some education beyond high school. About a third of the jobs will be filled by college graduates, compared with less than one fourth (22 percent) in the mid-1980s.

Projected job trends coupled with demographic trends indicate that more highly skilled workers are needed today than in the past and that increased

Joyce E. Allen is a Senior Research Associate with the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

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employment opportunities may be available for minorities. Unfortunately, a high proportion of black children are economically and socially disadvantaged, which could affect their access to high quality education and training. Moreover, unless present trends are reversed, a smaller proportion of them will be attending college and obtaining the skills needed to compete in the job market. In the past, the 1890 institutions (and other historically black colleges) have educated a disproportionate number of the disadvantaged. Current trends indicate that they may need to continue this mission in the future.

There is much literature that documents the positive contributions of black colleges and universities in educating black students, especially those who are disadvantaged (see, for example, Cheek; Garibaldi; National Advisory Committee on Black Higher Education and Black Colleges and Universities). Jones and Parks note, "By all accounts, 1890 institutions, along with the other historically black colleges and universities, have and continue to be the higher education institutions from which a vastly disproportionate number of blacks receive their baccalaureate degrees."

Studies (e.g., Brazziel) show that a disproportionately high percentage of blacks who have earned Ph.D.s received their bachelor's degree from historically black colleges and universities. An examination of the educational background of persons listed in the 1989 *Directory of Black Agricultural Economists* indicates that this holds true for the agricultural economics discipline (AAEA Committee on the Opportunities and Status of Blacks in Agricultural Economics).

Two recent studies (Allen; Fleming) of black undergraduate students at predominantly black colleges and those at predominantly white colleges provide further evidence of some of the positive impacts of black colleges. Sociologist Walter Allen of the University of Michigan concluded that, "black colleges offer a more nurturing academic and social environment, and graduate proportionally larger numbers of black students. They also provide students with the skills and self-confidence necessary to compete effectively in graduate and professional schools, as well as in the world of work." This is not to suggest that black students should attend only predominantly black colleges and universities but simply points out that there are many positive benefits that accrue to society as a result of maintaining 1890 and other historically black colleges

and universities. Given the demographic and job trends cited above, these benefits may become more valuable in the future.

AGRICULTURAL PROGRAMS AT THE 1890 INSTITUTIONS

Jones and Parks rely heavily on literature (e.g., Schuh; Connor) that questions the relevance of land-grant institutions. They suggest that this literature has the following common theme: "Changing societal conditions mandate that colleges of agriculture change their focus or they will cease to be relevant, and thus their continued existence will be in danger." However, I would caution against any assumption that a similar situation exists in the 1890 institutions. Some of the problems that Jones and Parks cite (e.g., discontinuance of agricultural instructional programs at some 1890 institutions) may be related to declining enrollment rather than the type of malaise that Schuh describes. Moreover, the study by McDowell and Evans shows that five of the seventeen 1890 institutions established a master's degree program in agricultural economics or agribusiness in the past decade, which suggests that the agricultural economics programs in some of these institutions are not in decline.

Schuh argues that it is time for land-grant universities to regain relevance because there is a pervasive attitude in the universities that "applied work is not important; publishing for professional peers and consulting for the highest paying firm or government agency are the priority tasks" (p. 6). He further states that "today the criterion for promotion is publishing in scholarly journals. In turn people are self- and peer-oriented. They do not feel a responsibility to contribute to the institutional mission of solving society's problems."

Publications about the research program at the 1890 institutions lead one to question if the observations made by Schuh are germane to these institutions. Two reports in particular [*Development of Research at Historically Black Land-Grant Institutions* (Mayberry) and *Progress and Productivity Through Research and Service: Agricultural Research at the 1890 Institutions*] emphasize that most 1890 institutions conduct research on the problems confronting limited-resource farmers and rural populations. In fact, a review of the research projects at the 1890 institutions clearly shows that these institutions are focusing on problems that affect the economic well-being of disadvantaged persons.

Further, since the 1890 institutions did not receive sustained Federal funding for research until 1977, it is unlikely that a "publish or perish" mentality has become entrenched at these universities.¹ Consequently, teaching and outreach activities are weighed heavily in tenure and promotion decisions. The 1890 institutions would do well to heed Schuh's warning about the current status of land-grant universities. It is important that their activities that address the existing social and economic problems of disadvantaged people are not diminished as they strive to improve their research programs.

NEEDED DIRECTIONS

Jones and Parks briefly describe changes that must be made in agricultural programs at the 1890 institutions if the programs are to be relevant to the needs of students and potential employers. They suggest that "greater emphasis be devoted to improving the plight of blacks and others who comprise our nation's urban centers" and that changes be made in curricula content "in order to enhance communicative, analytical and critical thinking skills." While I agree with these suggestions, it is important to note that the 1890 institutions are not monolithic. Too often, we do not discuss how they differ or examine the strengths and weaknesses of each institution.

Discussions with some faculty members at the 1890 institutions indicate that some of the changes advocated by Jones and Parks are underway. For example, the agricultural economics faculty at North Carolina A&T State University conducts an annual review of the curriculum and revises it as needed. In recent years, they have incorporated more computer applications and modules to enhance communication skills in their courses. Other institutions, such as South Carolina State College, have instituted advisory councils that strengthen the university's outreach with agribusiness and help to ensure that students obtain the skills that are needed to succeed in private industry. The paper by Jones and Parks could have been improved if they had discussed the diverse nature of the 1890 institutions.

This information is needed to assess better the direction in which the various institutions are moving.

Lastly, given their focus on human resource development, it is surprising that Jones and Parks do not discuss the faculty at the 1890 institutions. A review of the existing data indicates that the agricultural economics faculty at the 1890 institutions received their Ph.D.s from some of the most prestigious land-grant universities in the United States.² In order for them to enhance or maintain the human capital that they have acquired, they need to have certain opportunities and resources available to them including sufficient time to conduct research, graduate research assistants, sabbatical leave, and travel grants to attend professional meetings. The quality of teaching, research, and extension programs at the various 1890 institutions can be enhanced if opportunities are provided for faculty members to increase their own skills.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In summary, the 1890 institutions provide a plethora of services. Historically, their focus has been on teaching and outreach, but in recent years research has received increased attention. Given endemic societal problems, the role that these institutions have played in educating disadvantaged students and addressing problems that affect the low-income population is critical. A recent study by De Vita and O'Hare, entitled *America in the 21st Century: Human Resource Development*, points out that the 1990s provide a window of opportunity for facing the nation's human and work place problems—problems that if ignored could lead to dire consequences. The 1890 institutions can continue to play a key role in addressing these problems. However, they will need increased support from other institutions such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1862 land-grant universities, and professional associations of agricultural economists and other scientists in order to maximize their contribution to human resource development in this country.

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¹ Section 1445 of the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977 authorized a formula-funded research program (commonly known as the Evans-Allen Research Program) for the 1890 institutions.

² The *Directory of Black Agricultural Economists* shows that this holds true for blacks. According to McDowell and Evans, the overwhelming majority of the agricultural economists employed at the 1890 institutions are black. Thus, conclusions were made about the educational background of the 1890 faculty based on the backgrounds of the black agricultural economists at these institutions.

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